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Suspicious Images: Iconophobia and the Ethical Gaze

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If iconophobia is defined as the suspicion and anxiety towards the power exerted by images, its history is an ancient one in all of its Platonic, Christian, and Judaic forms. At its most radical, iconophobia results in an act of iconoclasm, or the total destruction of the image. At the other end of the spectrum, contemporary iconophobia may be more subtle. Images are simply withdrawn from circulation with the aim of eliminating their visibility. In his book *Images in Spite of All,* French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman questions the tradition of suspicion and denigration governing visual representations of the Holocaust, arguing we have abdicated our ethical obligation to try to imagine. This essay will argue that disruptions to traditional modes of spectatorship shift the terms of viewing from suspicion to ethical participation. By building on Didi-Huberman's discussion of images and the spectatorial gaze, this essay will consider Laura Waddington's 2002 documentary film *Border*. Waddington spent six months hiding with asylum seekers in the area surrounding the Red Cross refugee camp at Sangatte in northern France. I will argue that Waddington proposes a model of spectatorship that implicates the viewer into the ethical content of the film. By seeking to restore the dignity and humanity of the asylum seekers rather than viewing them with suspicion, *Border* is an acute reminder of our moral responsibility to bear witness to that which lies beyond the boundaries of conventional representations of asylum seekers.

The economy managing the circulation of mainstream media images is a highly suspicious mechanism. After the initial process of image selection and distribution, what we are left with is an already homogenised collection of predictable and recyclable media images. The result is an increasingly iconophobic media gaze as the actual content of the image is depleted. In her essay "Precarious Life," Judith Butler describes this economy in terms of the "normative processes" of control exercised by the mainstream media, arguing that the structurally unbalanced media representations of the 'other' result in creating a progressively dehumanised effect (Butler 146). This process of disidentification completes the iconophobic circle as the spectator, unable to develop empathy, views the dehumanised subject with increasing suspicion. Written in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror, Butler's insights are important as they alert us to the possibility of a breach or rupture in the image economy. It is against Butler's normative processes that Didi-Huberman's critique of Holocaust iconoclasm and Waddington's *Border* propose a slippage in representation and spectatorship capable of disrupting the homogeneity of the mass circulation of images.

Most images that have come to represent the Holocaust in our collective memory were either recorded by the Nazis for propaganda or by the Allies on liberation in 1945. Virtually no photographs exist from inside the concentration camps. This is distinct from the endlessly recycled images of gaunt, emaciated survivors and bulldozers pushing aside corpses which have become critical in defining Holocaust iconography (Saxton 14). Familiar and recognisable, this visual record constitutes a "visual memory bank" that we readily draw upon when conjuring up images of the Holocaust. What occurs, however, when an image falls outside the familiar corpus of Holocaust representation? This was the question raised in a now infamous exhibition held in Paris in 2001 (Chéroux). The exhibition included four small photographs secretly taken by members of the *Sonderkommando* inside the Nazi extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944. The *Sonderkommando* were the group of prisoners who were delegated the task of the day-to-day running of the crematoria. The photographs were smuggled out of the camps in a tube of toothpaste, and eventually reached the Polish Resistance.

By evading the surveillance of the SS the photographs present a breach in the economy of Holocaust iconography. They exist as an exception to the rule, mere fragments stolen from beneath the all-seeing eye of the SS Guards and their watch towers. Despite operating in an impossible situation, the inmate maintained the belief that these images could provide visual proof of the existence of the gas chambers. The images are testimony produced inside the camp itself, a direct challenge to the discourse emphasising the prohibition of representation of the Holocaust and in particular the gas chambers.

Figure 1 The Auschwitz crematorium in operation, photograph by *Sonderkommando* prisoners August 1944 © www.auschwitz.org.pl

Didi-Huberman's essay marks a point of departure from the iconophobia which has stressed the unimaginable (Lanzmann), unknowable (Lyotard), and ultimately unrepresentable (Levinas) nature of the Holocaust since the 1980s. Denigrated and derided, images have been treated suspiciously by this philosophical line of thought, emphasising the irretrievable gap between representation and the Holocaust. In a direct assault on the tradition of framing the Holocaust as unrepresentable, Didi-Huberman's essay becomes a plea to the moral and ethical responsibility to bear witness. He writes of the obligation to these images, arguing that "it is a response we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience" (3). The photographs are not simply archival documents, but a testament to the humanity of the members of the *Sonderkommando* the Nazis sought to erase.

Suspicion towards the potential power exerted by images has been neutralised by models of spectatorship privileging the viewer's mastery and control. In traditional theories of film spectatorship, the spectator is rendered in terms of a general omnipotence described by Christian Metz as "an all-powerful position which is of God himself..." (49). It is a model of spectatorship that promotes mastery over the image by privileging the unilateral gaze of the spectator. Alternatively, Didi-Huberman evokes a long counter tradition within French literature and philosophy of the "seer seen," where

the object of the spectator's gaze is endowed with the ability to return the gaze resulting in various degrees of anxiety and paranoia. The image of the "seer seen" recurs throughout the writing of Baudelaire, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, and Barthes, negating the unilateral gaze of an omnipotent spectator (Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons*).

Didi-Huberman explicitly draws upon Jacques Lacan's thinking about the gaze in light of this tradition of the image looking back. In his 1964 seminars on vision in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan dedicates several chapters to demonstrate how the visual field is structured by the symbolic order, the real, symbolic and the imaginary. Following Lacan, Didi-Huberman introduces two terms, the veil-image and the tear-image, which are analogous with Lacan's imaginary and the real. The imaginary, with its connotations of illusion and fantasy, provides the sense of wholeness in both ourselves and what we perceive. For Didi-Huberman, the imaginary corresponds with the veil-image. Within the canon of Holocaust photography, the veil-image is the image "where nobody really looks," the screen or veil maintaining the spectator's illusion of mastery (81). We might say that in the circulation of Holocaust atrocity images, the veil serves to anaesthetise and normalise the content of the image.

Lacan's writing on the gaze, however, undermines the spectator's mastery over the image by placing the spectator not at the all-seeing apex of the visual field, but located firmly within the visual field of the image. Lacan writes, "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am the picture...I am *photo-graphed*" (Lacan 106). The spectator is ensnared in the gaze of the image as the gaze is reciprocated. For Didi-Huberman, the veil-image seeks to disarm the threat to the spectator being caught in the image-gaze. Lacan describes this neutralisation in terms of "the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze" (101). Further on, Lacan expresses this in terms of the *dompte-regarde,* or a taming of the gaze (109). The veil-image maintains the fiction of the spectator's ascendency by subduing the threat of the image-gaze.

In opposition to the veil-image is the tear-image, in which for Didi-Huberman "a fragment of the real escapes" (81). This represents a rupture in the visual field. The real is presented here in terms of the *tuché*, or missed encounter, resulting in the spectator's anxiety and trauma. As the real cannot be represented, it is the point where representation collapses, rupturing the illusion of coherency maintained by the veil-image. Operating as an exception or disruption to the rule, the tear-image disrupts the image economy. No longer neutralised, the image returns the gaze, shattering the illusion of the all-seeing mastery of the spectator. Didi-Huberman describes this tearing exception to the rule, "where everyone suddenly feels looked at" (81).

To treat the *Sonderkommando* photographs as tear-images, not veil-images, we are offered a departure from classic models of spectatorship. We are forced to align ourselves and identify with the "inhuman" gaze of the *Sonderkommando*. The obvious response is to recoil. The gaze here is not the paranoid Sartrean gaze, evoking shame in the spectator-as-voyeur. Nor are these photographs reassuring narcissistic veil-images, but will always remain the inimical gaze of the Other—tearing, ripping images, which nonetheless demand that we do not turn away. It is an ethical response we must offer.

If the power of the tear-image resides in its ability to disrupt traditional modes of representation and spectatorship, I would like to discuss this in relation to Laura Waddington's 2004 film *Border*. Waddington is a Brussels based filmmaker with a particular interest in documenting the movement of displaced peoples. Just as the *Sonderkommando* photographs were taken clandestinely from beneath the gaze of the SS, Waddington evaded the surveillance of the French police and helicopter patrols as she bore witness to the plight of asylum seekers trying to reach England. *Border*

presents her stolen testimony, operating outside the familiar iconography of mainstream media's representation of asylum seekers.

If we were to consider the portrayal of asylum seekers by the Australian media in terms of the veil-image, we are left with a predictable body of homogenised and neutralised stock media images. The myth of Australia being overrun by boat people is reinforced by the visual iconography of the news media. Much like the iconography of the Holocaust, these types of images have come to define the representations of asylum seekers. Traceable back to the 2001 Tampa affair images tend to be highly militarised, frequently with Australian Navy patrol boats in the background. The images reinforce the 'stop the boats' rhetoric exhibited on both sides of politics, paradoxically often working against the grain of the article's editorial content.

Figure 2 Thursday 16 Apr 2009 there was an explosion on board a suspected illegal entry vessel (SIEV) 36 in the vicinity of Ashmore Reef. © Commonwealth of Australia 2011

Figure 3 The crew of HMAS Albany, Attack One, board suspected illegal entry vessel (SIEV) 38 © Commonwealth of Australia 2011

The media gaze is structurally unbalanced against the suffering of asylum seekers. In Australia asylum seekers are detained in mandatory detention, in remote sites such as Christmas Island and Woomera. Worryingly, the Department of Immigration maintains strict control over media representations of the conditions inside the camps, resulting in a further abstraction of representation. Geographical isolation coupled with a lack of

transparent media access contributes to the ongoing process of dehumanisation of the asylum seekers. Judith Butler describes this as "The erasure of that suffering through the prohibition of images and representations" (146). In the endless recycling of images of leaky fishing boats and the perimeters of detention centres, our critical capacity to engage becomes progressively eroded. These images fulfil the function of the veil-image, where nobody really looks as there is nothing left to see.

Figure 4 Asylum seekers arrive by boat on Christmas Island, Friday, July 8, 2011. AAP Image/JOSH JERGA

Figure 5 Woomera Detention Centre. AAP Image/ROB HUTCHISON

By reading Laura Waddington's *Border* against an iconophobic media gaze, we are afforded the opportunity to reconsider this image economy and the suspicious gaze of the spectator it seeks to solicit. *Border* reminds us of the paradoxical function of the news image—it shows us everything, but nothing at all. In a subtle interrogation of our indifference to the existence of asylum seekers and their suffering, *Border* is a record of the six months Waddington spent hidden in the fields surrounding the French Red Cross camp at Sangatte in 2002. Sangatte is a small town in northern France, just south of Calais and only one and a half hours' drive from Paris. The asylum seekers are predominantly Afghan and Iraqi. *Border* is a record of the last stop in their long

desperate journey to reach England, which then had comparatively humane asylum seeking policies. The men are attempting to cross the channel tunnel, hidden in trucks and on freight trains. Many are killed or violently injured in their attempts to evade capture by the French police. Nevertheless they are sustained by the hope that England will offer them "a better life."

Figure 6 Still from *Border* showing asylum seekers in the fields of Sangatte ©Laura Waddington 2002

Waddington dedicates the film, "for those I met." It is an attempt to restore the humanity and dignity of the people who are denied individual identities. Waddington refuses to let "those who I met" remain nameless. She names them—Omar, Muhammad, Abdulla—and narrates their individual stories. *Border* is Waddington's attempt to return a voice to those who have been systematically dehumanised, by-products of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his classic account of documentary, Bill Nichols describes six modes of documentary representation (99–138). In *Border*, Waddington is working in the participatory mode, going into the field and participating in the lives of others (115). It is via this mode of representation that Waddington is able to heighten the ethical encounter with the asylum seekers. Waddington was afforded no special status as a filmmaker, but lived as a refugee among the asylum seekers during the six months of filming. At no point are we granted visible access to Waddington, yet we are acutely aware of her presence. She is physically participating in the drama unfolding before her. At times, we become alert to her immediate physical danger, as she too runs through the fields away from the police and their dogs.

The suspicious gaze is predicated on maintaining a controlled distance between the spectator and the subject. Michele Aaron (82–123) has recently argued for a model of spectatorship as an intrinsically ethical encounter. Aaron demonstrates that spectatorship is not neutral but always complicit—it is a contract between the spectator and the film. Particularly relevant to the purposes of this essay is her argument concerning the "merging gaze," where the gaze of the filmmaker and spectator are collapsed. This has the effect of folding the spectator into the film's narrative (93). Waddington exploits the documentary medium to implicate the spectator into the structure of the film. It is in Waddington's full participatory immersion into the documentary itself that undermines the conventional distance maintained by the spectator. The spectator can no longer remain neutral as the lines of demarcation between filmmaker and spectator collapse.

Waddington was shooting alone with a small video camera at night in extremely low-light conditions. The opening scene is dark and grainy, refusing immediate entry into the film. As our eyes gradually adjust to the light, we realise we are looking at a young man, concealed in the bushes from the menacing glare of the lights of oncoming traffic. Waddington does not afford us the all-perceiving spectatorial mastery over the image. Rather, we are crouching with her as she records the furtive movements of the man. The background sound, a subtle and persistent hum, adds to a growing disquiet, a looming sense of apprehension concerning the fate of these asylum seekers.

Figure 7 Grainy still showing the Red Cross camp in *Border* ©Laura Waddington 2002

Waddington's commentary has been deliberately pared back and her voice over is minimal with extended periods of silence. The camera alternates from meditative, lingering shots taken from the safety offered by the Red Cross camp, to the fields where the shots are truncated and chaotically framed. The actions of the asylum seekers jerk and shudder, producing an image akin to the flicker effect of early silent cinema because the film is not running at the full rate of 24 frames per second. Here the images become blurred to the point of unintelligibility. Like the *Sonderkommando* photographs, the asylum seekers exist as image-fragments, shards stolen by Waddington's camera as she too works hard to evade capture.

Tension gradually increases throughout the film, cumulating in a riot scene after a decision to close the camp down. The sweeping search lights of the police helicopter remind us of the increased surveillance undertaken by the border patrols. Without the safety of the Red Cross camp, the asylum seekers are offered no protection from the increasing police brutality. With nowhere else to go, the asylum seekers are forced into the town of Sangatte itself, to sleep in the streets. They are huddled together, and there is a faintly discernible chant repeating in the background, calling to the UN for help. At points during the riot scene, Waddington completely cuts the sound, enveloping the film in a haunting silence. We are left with a mute montage of distressing still images recording the clash between the asylum seekers and police. Again, we are reminded of Waddington's lack of immunity to the violence, as the camera is deliberately knocked from her hand by a police officer.

Figure 8 Clash between asylum seekers and police in *Border* ©Laura Waddington 2002

It is via the merged gaze of the camera and the asylum seekers that Waddington exposes the fictional mastery of the spectator's gaze. The fury of the tear-image is unleashed as the image-gaze absorbs the spectator into its visual field. No longer pacified by the veil, the spectator is unable to retreat to familiar modes of spectatorship to neutralise and disarm the image. With no possible recourse to desire and fantasy, the encounter becomes intrinsically ethical. Refusing to be neutralised by the Lacanian veil, the tear-image resists the anaesthetising effects of recycled and predictable images of asylum seekers.

This essay has argued that a suspicious spectator is the product of an iconophobic media gaze. In the endless process of recycling, the critical capacity of the image to engage the viewer becomes progressively disarmed. Didi-Huberman's reworking of the Lacanian gaze proposes a model of spectatorship designed to disrupt this iconophobic image economy. The veil-image asks little from us as spectators beyond our complicity. Protected by the gaze of the image, the fiction of the all—perceiving spectator is maintained. By abandoning this model of spectatorship as Didi-Huberman and Waddington are asking us to do, the unidirectional relationship between the viewer and the image is undermined. The terms of spectatorship may be relocated from suspicion to an ethical, participatory mode of engagement. We are laying down our weapons to receive the gaze of the Other.

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